

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching

Case study 4.

Supporting community and learner preparedness through online forums



Summary

First year arts students in large classes with diverse students have reported feeling a sense of disassociation from their peers. In this case study, online forums were used to address this issue by creating a subject-based online community. In addition, the forums have been used to enhance student learning by structuring student preparation for classes and increasing the level of communication between tutors and students. Specific aspects of this case study include:

- Creating a subject-based community to facilitate engagement and motivation
- Guiding learning: tutors identifying learning issues in the forums and addressing these in the tutorials
- Collective learning: students learning from and with their peers
- Increasing student understanding of appropriate preparation for class

Key words

Blogs; message/discussion boards; discussion forums; learning hub



What worked?

This case describes a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts who has established online forums in her first year medieval history course. The goal of the use of this technology was twofold: to provide an environment in which students studying first year medieval history could discuss the course, interact with their peers and generate a stronger conversation with their tutor regarding their learning; and to address the disassociation often felt by first year arts students who have a widespread cohort. It was assumed that by helping students to connect with each other and teaching staff, it would help improve their motivation, engagement, and satisfaction. In addition to general discussion on the course, students respond to a topic set by their tutor each week for which they receive a mark. The task is completed prior to the tutorial so that the tutor can identify problem areas that need to be addressed.

Online forums in the Faculty of Arts

Diane is a lecturer in the Medieval History department. Several years ago, Diane, together with a colleague decided to address a key concern that had been identified through student feedback and discussion with a transition coordinator. The concern was that first year arts students reported feeling a sense of disassociation from their peers due to the range of subjects within an arts degree which can result in a widespread cohort. In an effort to generate a stronger course community Diane initially established an online forum in the form of a blog for her first year medieval history course. The goal was twofold. First, to “foster conversation amongst the students, both for the purposes of understanding the week’s material, but in particular for that transition purpose of forging some friendship and knowledge of one another through that.” Second, Diane was conscious that many first year students can have difficulty understanding the source material involved in a specialised subject like medieval history, students may not have come across the material ever in their study previously.

So for first years coming into Medieval History they’ve got some real challenges coming to terms with the nature of the source material that we’re asking them to read, because it’s so foreign, and people generally primed to be kind of dismissive of the medieval world view, and it can be genuinely confusing to confront these source materials. And so the blogs were a way for the tutor and students to be in dialogue with one another, trying to figure out how to approach these materials in the preparation for the discussion in the classroom. (Diane)

Initially the blogs were set up through *Blogger.com* (now part of the *Google* suite). Each tutorial group had their own blog and the tutors wrote a head post each week for students to respond to, tutors would then participate in the “ensuing discussion” with students by becoming “part of the commenting community.” Each blog was visible to all students enrolled in the subject; students could not only post on their own blogs but on others in the subject as well. The tone of the blogs was kept relatively informal with students encouraged

to be “open about what they don’t know.” Diane reported that there was ‘a good response from students.’

I do think the forums created some camaraderie amongst us, being able to whinge all together is a good therapeutic tool. (Student 3)

However, as *Blogger* was external to the university system there was limited support for technical issues and consequently an increased level of time commitment was placed on tutors.

...it was all separate from the Monash system, and I think in some ways that promoted students feeling that they were doing something genuinely special and unique to them. And so it promoted engagement with the activity, but it also made it quite a burden on the tutors, and not all of them were as comfortable in the electronic things as I am for example. So I had to spend quite a lot of my time training the tutors to give the IT support, because eSolutions weren’t able to do so. (Diane)

Diane and her team decided that instead the blogs might be better placed within the university system because there would be an established model of technical support and therefore the use of forums would be more sustainable. Diane set up the forums through the university *Learning Management System*; she uses the blog format function, which allows for threaded comments. Students have a separate forum for each tutorial group and are not able to see or comment on the forums of other groups within the subject. Since moving into the LMS, Diane and her team described a reduced sense of ownership over the forums by the students. Diane commented that moving the online forums into an institutional context has meant that they haven’t been particularly successful in building a cohort or relationships between students. In particular, Diane observed that the forums have become less interactive and more prescriptive.

I don’t have any scientific evidence for this, but my sense is that because Moodle is an institutional product, and let’s be honest it’s not the prettiest interface in the world, it no longer feels special and unique, and it feels Monash branded in a way that makes students a bit blasé about it if not kind of disengaged. (Diane)

Diane became concerned about the decrease in student participation in the forums since being moved into the LMS and therefore introduced marks for student contributions in order to re-engage students.

Diane noted that the online forum fulfils an important pedagogical role in that they encourage students to complete appropriate preparation prior to class; additionally the forums enable tutors to identify areas of difficulty that could then be discussed in tutorials. To ensure they were able to do this, tutors set a deadline for participation in the forum prior to the tutorial so that they had time to look over the posts and target key misunderstandings. The student interviews confirmed that the forums became a valuable

platform to engage in learning as well as to receive notifications from the lecturer. For example,

The best aspect of the forums for me was that they created another learning platform, and I don't think anyone would suggest you can have too many of those. Additionally, they were extremely accessible and one answer from [the lecturer] whether it be regarding some text or administrative matters, would reach a large number of us. (Student 2)

Another student commented on the degree to which the forums helped her to prepare for the class tutorials,

As we were required to comment prior to the tutorial, it also meant that we were having to actively think and engage with the topics prior to coming together to talk about them, so it was a stimulating means of preparing group discussion. (Student 2)

Students also reported that they were more comfortable communicating with each other via the online forum as opposed to face-to-face in the lectures or tutorials. They felt less anxious voicing their thoughts about what they did and didn't know or understand.

The forums were a refreshing way to prepare and gain some preliminary understanding into the topic for that week's tutorial... I also think that it was a very useful way of being able to get your opinion across, without the fear or concern of saying it in front of a class full of students. (Student 1)

Students also reported that they had a better experience in the tutorials because a level of intimacy had already been developed in the forums.

Seeing the thoughts of other respondents provided opportunity to see what the thoughts of others might be. I felt quite prepared for the tutorials, as a result. (Student 3)

According to data collected from the lecturer and students, the outcomes of the use of technology for this case included:

- Provided a secondary learning space for students to interact and learn outside of the classroom
- Students more comfortable interacting with each other
- Student understanding of content closely monitored; tutorials guided by observations of students responses in forums
- Increased student understanding of appropriate preparation for class

Diane is hoping to roll out the use of forums for other units in the faculty. She is also hoping to increase participation in the forums by raising the participation mark to 10%; the required expectations to gain the mark will be adapted to reflect the higher percentage.

Why it worked

Enablers

There are a variety of enabling factors that have led to or established the conditions within which online forums has been successfully used. This section highlights specific enabling factors that were evident in these specific case studies. These include:

Working within the learning management system reduces technical and administration problems for teachers and students: Diane noted that moving the online forums to an internal learning management system enabled her and her team to get technical support (for example, the team did not have to administer the enrolments or access). This enabled her team to spend a greater amount of time on student learning and also meant they did not “burn out” from working far beyond their allocated hours. Diane noted that utilising an internal learning platform for the forums also makes it easier for students to participate, as everything for their unit is located in the same online learning space.

Forums as an integral part of the learning sequence: Rather than treating technology - such as forums - as additions or optional extras, this case demonstrates the benefit of meaningfully integrating the technology into the learning sequence. In this case the students were expected to participate in the forums prior to class. Moreover, they were given a clear task to do in the forums that was explicitly connected to their upcoming class, for example to answer questions relating to the set reading that they would be using in the tutorial class. Often forums can be used as ancillary learning activities which in turn can negatively impact on participation rates since students do not understand the need or role of engaging. In this case the importance of participation was signalled by students receiving grades for making a contribution to the online forum. The assessment itself is likely to be less significant than the fact that the lecturers have clearly communicated to the students the importance of the task, and have given students clear guidance on what to do and how to understand if they have succeeded. This process sets the expectations for appropriate class preparation and is particularly beneficial to the first year students in this context. Similarly, Diane noted that through the students’ participation in the forum the students are more engaged in the subject content and have a deeper understanding of it.

Challenges

There are several challenges that can be noted in this case of the use of online forums. These include:

Keeping students motivated within a homogenised educational social media

experience: Diane reported that students are not as motivated to participate in the university-run forums as they were when the forums were based on *Blogger*. She commented that this has led to the forums becoming “less interactive and more prescriptive.” While the reason for this is unclear, Diane felt that this could be because the *Moodle* forums are an institutional product in which student agency and identity is limited in comparison to mainstream social media experiences. In popular blogging and community forum sites the participants usually create rich profiles, participate across conversations, have multiple ways of participating (for example, commenting, rating), and can make connections that are unrestricted by a teacher or institution.

Using popular systems outside of the institutional LMS can provide exciting learning opportunities but it also has an implication for staff administrative work and technical skills that can detract from the time given to planning for learning and teacher-student interaction: In this case, Diane noted the extra time it can take to manage external services. This includes tutors learning the required technical skills through to enrolling and managing students into the system. This can have a dramatic impact on workload and potentially negatively influence the teaching.

What the research literature says

An online discussion forum (ODF) is a virtual environment which supports the discussions and debates among the lecturer and students, and between students and their peers (Cheng, Paré, Collimore, & Joordens, 2011). Typically it involves asynchronous posting of text-based comments by both lecturer and students, which can be viewed by some or all of the class. However, it does not necessarily have to be text-based, nor does it need to conform to those other conventions arising from the designed functions of virtual learning environment systems. Critically, ODF provides learning opportunities for students through interaction with peers and the teacher (Savvidou, 2013).

To facilitate teacher-student, student-peer interactions in the ODF, the presence (and the roles) of the *moderator* (for example, lecturer/tutor) and *participants* (for example, students) must be understood and acknowledged. Social presence is a pertinent theme in an ODF, and is defined as “the awareness of others in any communicative interaction” (Savvidou, 2013, p. 195). Clearly a strong and positive social presence is important for individuals to project themselves and to establish personal and purposeful relationships for communication and group cohesion. Similarly, a strong degree of social presence is essential in facilitating meaningful online discussion forums for both the lecturer and students. Cheng et al. (2011) also claim that the use of ODF in higher education enables more academic dialogues and strengthens social interactions between students and the lecturer, allowing the social presence of the lecturer and students to exist more freely in an online learning setting.

Several studies have reported the use of asynchronous discussions in providing flexibility for students to work at times and places that suit them, while having adequate time to compose and reflect on their thoughts about their understanding of content before sharing

thoughts with others (Cheng, et al., 2011; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011; Green, Farchione, Hughes, & Chan, 2014). The archive of posts and threads also allows students to (re)visit theirs and others' contributions to topics or concepts as required. This allows learners to build their understanding of content and knowledge collaboratively. Gikandi et al. (2011) state that threaded asynchronous discussions provide participants with meaningful engagement in two ways by: a) facilitating opportunities for internal feedback, allowing students to review the feedback they receive (responses from others) and revisit related previous exchanges; and b) providing students with adequate opportunities to review and reflect upon previous contributions (by self or others), to reconstruct their thinking and compose deeply-thought ideas which they posted online as their new contributions and/or responses (feedback) to others' ideas.

Salmon's (2011) five-stage model provides a scaffold and structure for facilitating an ODF, and if each stage is followed accordingly, the model provides a structured environment that enables self-learning and collaborative learning to occur. In the context of the ODF, (*Stage 1 - access and motivation*) applied in the beginning ensures all participants have immediate access to the ODF. The moderator welcomes new participants and offers support, such as responding to student queries regarding the unit/course in an 'administrative' forum that is separate from a 'learning' forum that is learning-specific (Green, et al., 2014). Once participants have started using the ODF and established their online identities and interacted with others (*Stage 2 - online socialisation*), the moderator sets rules for using the ODF such as 'no tolerance on inappropriate posts' to ensure a safe and respectful learning environment for all (Green, et al., 2014). Participants may have then begun to share information relating to the course with each other (*Stage 3 - information exchange*), so it is important for the moderator to monitor and provide formative feedback where necessary, such as providing additional answers or clarification for a forum thread initiated by a student who is attempting to complete a learning objective, while other students attempt to respond (Green, et al., 2014). Course-related group discussions are likely to occur once students start sharing or exchanging information, making the interaction between participants more collaborative (*Stage 4 - knowledge construction*) and allowing participants to become authors in their own right. The moderator should aim to balance moderation and direct discussion with students, allowing students to be more proactive in responding to each other's posts (Green, et al., 2014), and collaboratively develop and explore ideas and work toward common understanding (Cheng, et al., 2011). Participants are likely to have become more active and responsible for their own learning once they have collaborated learning, so the moderator can encourage students to develop a more contextualised learning approach (*Stage 5 – development*), such as encouraging participants to use meaningful titles for forum threads or posts, enabling others to find already available information for their specific learning needs (Green, et al., 2014).

In addition to providing a contextualised learning environment for students, it has been found that a *structured* ODF, with task-focused posts and weekly moderation has enabled students to achieve higher final marks and a high level of interaction with their peers (Green, et al., 2014). Other strategies that have been found to facilitate authentic, meaningful and engaging activities using the ODF include role plays and debating (Henderson, 2008). Role

plays allow students to research and immerse themselves in a role, thus providing a powerful stimulus for critical reflection. Debates allow opposing teams to proposition their arguments and rebut others, constructing their arguments and strategising their responses. Role plays and debates in the ODF also provide the class with ongoing discussions and the teacher with ongoing formative assessment record.

It is becoming more common in tertiary units or courses to use the ODFs for formative assessment (Chung, Shel, & Kaiser, 2006; Gikandi, et al., 2011; Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). ODF allows formative assessment to be conducted as it enhances learners' engagement cognitively (for example, to be given feedback from peers/lecturer) (Chung, et al., 2006). Vonderwell, Liang and Alderman (2007) also argue that ODF enables self and peer formative assessment which results in 'reflective inquiry', allowing students to meaningfully interact, present multiple perspectives, collaboratively learn and share learning goals and expected outcomes with each other.

In contrast to using ODF for formative assessment, the attribution of marks to participation in the ODF with the explicit purpose of increasing student participation, is used for summative assessment in this case study. While mark attribution may encourage student participation in the ODF, Cheng et al.'s (2011) study found that students who participated *voluntarily* in an ODF (without marks attributed) performed *better* in the course overall than those who *did not* participate. This suggests that students can be self-motivated to participate in an ODF for the benefit of their own learning. Though student participation may or may not increase due to mark allocation for forum participation, what is more important is the content and quality of the forum posts in providing students with meaningful, contextualised learning.

Although ODFs have been found to have benefited students in several ways as discussed, other studies have found that students reported a lack of satisfaction with online discussions (Missett, Reed, Scot, Callahan, & Slade, 2010), a low proportion of task-related postings (for example, posts that are irrelevant to course content), and posts that lack in interaction (for example, students responding to other students) (Curran, Kirby, Parsons, & Lockyer, 2003; Son, 2006). It is evident that students learn best in the ODF when they are engaged in a structured discussion forum, with contributions from both the lecturer and students. Forum posts should be unit and/or course specific, students should have the opportunities to self-learn or collaboratively learn with peers, and the moderator should constantly monitor the forum to ensure posts are appropriate and adhere to topics being discussed, while promoting interaction between all parties (for example, lecturer-students, students-peers) to achieve meaningful learning.

Moving forwards

Participant advice

The respondent articulated several key ‘methods for success,’ which she noted as being simple and effective practices that were related to the success of online forums in enhancing learning amongst their students.

Be explicit regarding the goal and purpose of the forum - explain the benefits of participating to students. Have an explanatory statement that explains this also.

Set expectations - use the forums as a means to set expectations for students regarding class preparation, for example, weekly readings, revision.

Monitor the forums - it is important for tutors to regularly read the forums in order to know what they need to address in tutorials.

Offer grades as an incentive to participate - this is particularly necessary if the forums are based within an institutional context.

Encourage students to be open - be explicit that the forums are a place for students to be preliminary in their thoughts and to practice being open about what they don’t know.

Institutions moving forward

- Based on the perceived differences between external blogging services and internal ‘clunky’ forums, some investigation may be warranted to further explore the implications of using different social media, including those that are external to institutional LMS. Such systems often have remarkably different interfaces and functionality, implications for membership and control, as well as emphasis on profile building and social networking. Goals of building a sense of community may be better facilitated by services designed for that purpose, rather than colonising predominantly text based asynchronous, teacher-led interfaces of LMS discussion forums.
- However, innovation in digital technology needs to be supported by technical services since, as observed in this case, technical training and resolving technical issues as well as managing student membership can overload teaching staff and potentially detract from time and quality of teaching.
- It is ironic that institutions seeking to increase in-class engagement, including for diverse and large cohorts, may benefit from investing more effort in online engagement. As indicated in this case, online forums can be used effectively to generate a sense of community and to prepare students for in-class participation. In addition, such online participation, particularly set as pre-class activity, can help students understand the degree of preparation that is expected or required in order

to make the most of in-class interaction which will benefit their entire academic experience.

- Online participation needs to be explicitly valued by institutions and lecturers if it is to be valued by students. While it is a common belief that assessment increases participation, the correlation is not clear. It is unclear whether the grading itself results in increased participation, or if the context of the assessment is the dominant factor, such as the increased emphasis on the task by the lecturer, the clarity and achievability of task requirements, and the specificity of criteria for success. Having said this, assessment is one process which elicits this clarity and acts as a signal to students regarding the importance of the online task. If online participation is to be graded then institutions may need to consider their policies regarding students receiving grades for online participation/contributions and how that may be effectively assessed (for example, focussing on performance according to discernible criteria for success, as opposed to simply providing a mark for posting anything).
- In relation to using external social media, there is a need to consider, and educate teaching staff and students about issues of data, particularly in terms of digital footprint, privacy and control. Teachers need to consider if they have provided adequate safeguards in their use of social media to protect their students' and their own professional identity. For instance, inviting students to tweet or blog opinions that are open for public scrutiny may negatively impact on their professional career in years to come.

Resources for exploring

The following table outlines a range of technology useful for the setup/creation of online forums. The list is not comprehensive; each system has been included because it has featured in the project data collection or in related literature or cases. In addition, the list does not mean to suggest endorsement. Each of the platforms needs to be individually evaluated according to the particular needs of the lecturers.

Blogger	An online program developed by <i>Google</i> that provides users with the ability to create an online journal or 'blog' and share it with other users. The blog is hosted by <i>Blogger</i> and users can login. The blogs can be made private or be publicly accessible. In this case students had invited access to the blogs and were required to login. URL: https://google.com/blogger
Moodle (LMS)	An open-source learning platform for education and business institutions. The platform features learning tools and collaborative learning through forums and discussion boards. Being open source means that it is customisable to the needs of each institution. It is also well supported by a global community. URL: https://moodle.org

Guides, Cases and Readings

- The National Vocational Education and Training E-learning Strategy 2012-2015, a strategy previously supported by the former Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, is involved with stimulating and improving innovative approaches to training and employment in new learning technologies. A section of their toolkit of resources for teachers interested in new technologies for teaching features blogs and how to use them in a classroom setting.
URL: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/plan-and-deliver/design-e-learning/gallery/blogs/>
- The Office for Learning and Teaching funded a project in 2009 titled: Learning to teach online: developing high-quality video and text resources to help educators teach online led by the University of New South Wales, the resulting online resource was designed to help teachers to understanding online teaching pedagogies.
URL: <http://online.cofa.unsw.edu.au/learning-to-teach-online/about-the-project>

References

- Cheng, C. K., Paré, D. E., Collimore, L.-M., & Joordens, S. (2011). Assessing the effectiveness of a voluntary online discussion forum on improving students' course performance. *Computers & Education*, 56(1), 253-261.
- Chung, G. K., Shel, T., & Kaiser, W. J. (2006). An exploratory study of a novel online formative assessment and instructional tool to promote students' circuit problem solving. *The Journal of Technology, Learning and Assessment*, 5(6), 1-27.
- Curran, V., Kirby, F., Parsons, E., & Lockyer, J. (2003). Discourse analysis of computer-mediated conferencing in world wide web-based continuing medical education. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 23(4), 229-238.
- Gikandi, J. W., Morrow, D., & Davis, N. E. (2011). Online formative assessment in higher education: A review of the literature. *Computers & Education*, 57(4), 2333-2351.
- Green, R. A., Farchione, D., Hughes, D. L., & Chan, S. P. (2014). Participation in asynchronous online discussion forums does improve student learning of gross anatomy. *Anatomical sciences education*, 7(1), 71-76.
- Henderson, M. (2008). *Engaging eLearning strategies: role plays, debates and soap operas*. Proceedings of the Australian Council for Computers in Education conference, Canberra, ACT, Australia, 194-200.
- Missett, T. C., Reed, C. B., Scot, T. P., Callahan, C. M., & Slade, M. (2010). Describing learning in an advanced online case-based course in environmental science. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 22(1), 10-50.
- Salmon, G. (2011). *E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Savvidou, C. (2013). 'Thanks for sharing your story': the role of the teacher in facilitating social presence in online discussion. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 22(2), 193-211.

- Son, J.-B. (2006). Using online discussion groups in a CALL teacher training course. *RELC Journal*, 37(1), 123-135.
- Vonderwell, S., Liang, X., & Alderman, K. (2007). Asynchronous discussions and assessment in online learning. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 39(3), 309-328.